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Reagan and law

RONALD REAGAN did most of the things they said he should.

In his Wednesday night speech, encompassing probably the 12 most crucial minutes of his entire presidency, he conceded that the arms-to-Iran policy was a mistake. He expressed vigor. He professed commitment to an active presidency over the next two years.

He made it clear his National Security Council staff is from now on to toe the line. No more "free-lancing." The members are not to engage in covert operations themselves, and there is to be a review of covert operations across the board.

He made a graceful gesture of cooperation to Congress. He hinted at new momentum in negotiations with the Soviets to curb nuclear weapons.

He did not commit himself to change his management style, but he made it clear that the people he is recruiting to work within that style of management are to be of a caliber different from those he has let go.

Amid all the promises that had been urged of him, however, there was one particularly significant line. It came when he was speaking of William Webster, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, chosen to head central intelligence. Of Mr. Webster the President said: "He understands the meaning of the rule of law."

It was a needed affirmation that corner-cutting and deception in pursuit of perceived presidential goals are to be a thing of the past.

There were many aspects to criticize about the Iran debacle. There was the unprincipled policy itself, of secretly selling arms to a terrorist regime. There was the dismissal of expert contrary opinion within the administration.

There was the lying about the operation to key government officials outside the White House. There was the diversion of funds to supply weapons to the Nicaraguan contras at a time when such government involvement was barred by law.

But perhaps the most dangerous aspect of all was the creeping arrogance with which those involved in all of this cloaked their unwise and at times illegal activity. This arrogant confidence of the rightness of their cause made them contemptuous of accountability, scornful of the law. It is from such arrogance that dictatorship buds.

Thus it is good that in his new leadership lineup, Mr. Reagan prizes men who "understand the meaning of the rule of law."

Principle triumphs. Respect for the law is restored.

For Mr. Reagan personally, the speech was an important turnaround. Whether his presidency can ever regain the heights it occupied with the American public before the Iran debacle remains to be seen. But certainly Mr. Reagan seems to have plucked it out of the depths to which it sank in recent months.

One appearance of new vigor is the string of high-quality personnel appointments he has made. With the selection of the Frank Carluccis, the Howard Bakers, and the William Websters for key jobs, he has moved beyond ho-hum selections and instead recruited first-rate candidates. Their strength is tempered by their respect for the sometimes ponderous processes of government which nevertheless provide protection against excessive zeal.

What we have here is a new beginning, and there must be a series of building blocks set upon the foundation Mr. Reagan described Wednesday night. The commitment must be sustained beyond a flurry of appointments and pep talks to White House aides.

Mr. Reagan conceded he had been withdrawn and silent while the Tower Commission was investigating activities of the National Security Council staff. Now the need is for communication and accountability. Regular press conferences by a president seen to be in command of the issues, and eager to report to the people, would be a major forward step.

*John Hughes will be on vacation next week.
His column will resume March 18.*